

the spiral

fragments distro



state. To give only a brief list: Her day to day responsibilities included signing off on a series of police raids throughout the region and facilitating the grand jury inquiry into the radical left in the Pacific Northwest, which placed several people (who were neither charged with nor even suspected of any crime) in solitary confinement in federal prison for months in an attempt to socially map the region's anarchist networks. She also personally spearheaded the infiltration of Seattle's radical scene by a paid informant who was also a convicted sex offender and pedophile. Not only has she never denied such actions, but instead has repeatedly justified them in public statements. All of these events were documented in detail in a series of articles written by Brendan Kiley for the local alt-weekly, *The Stranger*.

13 This is the exact opposite pattern, then, of the conspiracy of the spineless, which argues that it is in fact infiltrators (or even plainclothes police) who always break the first windows.

14 This crisis of racialization in the US, driven by transformations in the material processes that have undergirded the production of race, remains undertheorized overall. Even those who teach critical race theory and discuss in detail the process of racialization at the theoretical level often rely on incorrect or outdated data, or cede too much of the argument to liberal anti-racist paradigms (such as the *New Jim Crow* reading of mass incarceration put forward by Michelle Alexander) and thereby misidentify either its integral economic dimensions or the crisis caused by the continuing change of those economic coordinates. One superior source of data on the overall phenomenon is Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag*, but even this book (published in 2007) is now outdated in its data and does not give a precise idea of how the process has changed in the decade following the Great Recession. But this is precisely when the crisis of racialization begins to become visible. For a more recent examination of some data on a fundamental features of racialization and how it has changed over time, see: John Clegg and Adaner Usmani, "The Economic Origins of Mass Incarceration," *Catalyst*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 2019, <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol3/no3/the-economic-origins-of-mass-incarceration>.

15 In rust belt cities where the demographic profile is still predominantly Black and white, the class dimension is even more salient, as Black upper and middle classes aligned with the democratic party apparatus (or even staffing police departments and judicial systems) are tasked with the wide-ranging suppression of a revolt by Black and White proletarians, often in newly-impooverished suburbs or secondary hinterland cities on the fringes of mega-urban complexes.

16 *Hinterland* has been published in French as *Hinterland: Nouveau paysage de classes et de conflits aux Etats-Unis*, trans. A. Lecuyer (Paris: Grevis, 2020)

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Endnotes

- 1 The looting in Beverly Hills and Santa Monica has been widely reported. For the original video of a crowd looting a moving train in Chicago, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hB6lIqYoamo>.
- 2 EJ Dickson, “Mysterious Deaths Leave Ferguson Activists ‘On Pins and Needles,’” *Rolling Stone*, March 18, 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/ferguson-death-mystery-black-lives-matter-michael-brown-809407/>.
- 3 The Chinese riots are lesser known, but equally substantial, and they bear a remarkable similarity to anti-police riots elsewhere. The main difference is the way in which they occurred alongside a rising wave of factory struggles in the same years. For more information on these events, see: “No Way Forward, No Way Back,” *Chuǎng*, Issue 1: Dead Generations, 2016. <http://chuangcn.org/journal/one/no-way-forward-no-way-back/>.
- 4 The 2010 occupation and subsequent events are too complex to describe in detail here. A good overview is provided by: NPC, “The Solstice: On the Rise of the Right- Wing Mass Movements, Winter 2013/2014,” *Ultra*, April 27, 2014, <http://www.ultra-com.org/project/the-solstice/>.
- 5 The argument in this section draws heavily throughout from the concepts developed in an excellent piece of political writing on the Yellow Vests, including the use of similar terminology: Paul Torino and Adrian Wohlleben, “Memes with Force—Lessons from the Yellow Vests,” *Mute*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/memes-force-%E2%80%93-lessons-yellow-vests>.
- 6 For more on the Umbrella movement, see: “Black vs. Yellow: Class Antagonism and Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement,” *Ultra*, October 3, 2014, <http://www.ultra-com.org/project/black-versus-yellow/>.
- 7 For more on the dynamics of exactly how this decentralization worked, especially the role of the “frontliner” in street clashes, see: “Welcome to the Frontlines: Beyond Violence and Non-Violence,” *Chuǎng*, June 8, 2020, <http://chuangcn.org/2020/06/frontlines/>.
- 8 Jacqueline Reuss, “Yellow Vests in a New Social Landscape,” *Brooklyn Rail*, October 2019, <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/10/field-notes/Yellow-Vests-in-a-New-Social-Landscape>.
- 9 Zacharias Zoubir, “A Vest that Fits All,” *Commune*, January 25, 2019, <https://communemag.com/a-vest-that-fits-all/>.
- 10 Zoubir, *ibid*.
- 11 Torino and Wohlleben, *ibid*.
- 12 Namely Jenny Durkan, current mayor of Seattle and former chief federal prosecutor for Western Washington during Occupy and the first BLM movement, in which capacity she helped to develop the repressive toolset used by the local

the spiral

Phil A Neel

It is Happening Again

TIME TURNS IN ON ITSELF LIKE A CRASHING WAVE. WE OFTEN find ourselves adrift in the gyre, lost in the same places with the same events transpiring around us and altered only by the most gentle of inversions. Usually the ebb and flow is subtle, the space itself part of that grander economic ritual over which we have no control: the commute to work, the delivery route, the many minor memorizations of mundane locations or the order of the aisles. These repetitions remind us that space and time are joined, after all, as flesh is joined to chained-together bone and carried forward with it. Alone, this the simple, existential helix of lived experience. But human life is fundamentally collective, which means that this, like many things, is only clearly visible at the aggregate scale—which we call politics, or history, the name for politics sprawled out through time. And it’s at this scale that we truly see how nothing is ever quite repeated. Every wave is a wave like the last but not the same. The amplitude is sometimes greater, its trough deeper and darker this time and its crest ever higher, clawing at the sky.

We can be forgiven if, caught up in its ascent, we fail to see the parabolic pattern and instead project an exponential arc, as if this wave might be the final one—the breathless insurrection, the flood rising past the gates of heaven at last.

In this way I found myself on a particular corner in downtown Seattle in 2020 on a particularly rainy day at the end of May. My clothes had soaked through in the usual way. Teargas and pepper grenades gave the air that familiar spice, recalling a hundred moments such as this here and elsewhere. Now in Seattle shattered glass crunched underfoot like sand. The space echoed with music blasting out of cars idling through the crowd, with cheers and loud, incanted epithets against the line of police guarding a gutted intersection. Eight years earlier on a sunny day at the other end of May another masked crowd had careened across that same intersection after smashing through Niketown and American Apparel. This time around Niketown was spared—years of subsequent May Day riots had targeted it with such consistency that now at every hint of

protest the company boards the windows and hires private security to stand guard—and American Apparel had long ago gone bankrupt. So instead it was the North Face across the street, its door pried open and its many fleeces passed from hand to hand by the roving zoomers; and another outdoor apparel brand where the American Apparel had once sat, smashed and ransacked and its wealth of puffy coats looted in armloads, some dropped from overburdened shoulders and the shiny bright fabric knit for winter snow draped over piles of broken glass that stretched like ice banks on the shore of the sidewalk.

It is in the simplest physical details of force and quantity that we can see the divergence between iterations of the same. In 2012, maybe 500 people in a single mass tore through downtown in columns of black. By 2020, thousands scattered in blooming, looting clusters each one alone at least 100 strong. On May Day the grains of glass had been merely sprinkled over the sidewalks, adding a certain grit to the smooth circulation of cash and commodities but never really threatening to dam the flow—smashed windows were

were established activists—hold extremely amorphous and rapidly shifting political positions. They are united not by any shared program, but instead at the tactical level, by an oath committing them to whatever action will further the unrest, pry open the rift in society and seed political potentials further afield.

Because in the end, the long-sought reforms suddenly heaped at the feet of the activists are not really the goal. Whatever bills are passed, the police (even with cut budgets!) will continue to murder people. The economic crisis will deepen over time—and this will, in fact, guarantee that the police become more aggressive, preying on the population in places with tax bases further collapsed by the pandemic. Meanwhile, environmental devastation will spiral further toward mass extinction. So maybe, as the remaining activists are busy and the police are, at least, facing ever more widespread public enmity, more young people from the hinterland will pick up some of those fallen embers that have for years been circling the globe—something like a yellow vest or a yellow helmet, capable of drawing together a fragmented proletariat and melding it together, even if only for a moment, at least long enough to launch a first fiery assault on the pillars holding up hellworld. Because the basic fact remains the same as I described it years ago, at the similar end of a similar cycle in words now repeated by people I’ve never met: our futures have been looted. It’s time to loot back.¹⁶

ground even as all the most eviscerating features of racial experience deepen for the lower classes of those same “communities,” who are increasingly being thrown into new hyper-diverse ghettos further from the urban core.¹⁴ Now, those who demand deference to “Black leadership,” are faced with the reality of extremely multi-ethnic rebellions which make no claim to be representing “the Black community” at all. Meanwhile, these uprisings not only oppose the continuing murder of Black people at the hands of police, but also go further to clearly and vocally oppose the police in general, all while implying even more wide-ranging social and economic demands.¹⁵ Even in America, then—birthplace of the old New Left logic of connect-the-dots convergent struggles—the historical party formed from the writhing real movement of incendiary uprisings may be beginning to shake off the social movement that has long acted as its nectrophic parasite.

The emergence of a frontline ethic will be absolutely essential to this process. It gives the “radical” social movement activists an out, allowing them to support militant action in word and from a distance, marching far behind. This then provides a bulwark against the progressives and the liberals, who are the ones that most actively attempt to recuperate the movement into the city administration. In the beginnings of this second act, such people are at least now staying silent when militant action occurs, as the crowd around them chants, “I don’t see shit! I don’t say shit!” This provides a major defense against repression. Then, as time passes, even these more conservative participants end up realizing the value of this ethic, as previously unthinkable reforms are rapidly shuttled into the city council chambers—but only *after* the fires are lit. Throughout this whole process, there is an advancing frontline of newly radicalized young people pushing events forward in both the literal and figurative sense. In *Hinterland*, I referred to such people as ultras (after the football Ultras of the Arab Spring), in an attempt to emphasize their relatively depoliticized and pragmatic focus on questions of power in the street, which only takes on its particular political character after the fact. Today, the dynamic is much the same. On the surface, many of the movement’s de facto leadership—all of whom are on the frontlines, and none of whom

boarded and the shops barely lost a day of sales. But by this new End of May there was no such ready resumption. Glass sat ankle deep. The shops were plundered. Even without the pandemic already choking global supply chains, restocking would have eroded weeks of business. Each of the two mirrored moments also struck a different tone deep in the gut. The 2012 May Day riot had sat at the end of a movement—one of several pyrrhic burials that, in retrospect, were maybe more like the burning of a pyrophytic pine, seeding the future with the germ of politics to come. Afterwards were dark years, filled with repression, emigration and a general return to the atonal, depoliticized administration of the slowly ending world. The wave rose again in 2014–2015 in Ferguson and Baltimore and Baton Rouge but was suppressed with a quick decisiveness there and elsewhere, leaving maybe a weekend of freeway closures and a hundred new NGO entrepreneurs to feast on the remains. The first time on that downtown corner the gut feeling was not anticipation, but the adrenaline of the plummet, as we all together fell in our hundreds, trailing black and red flags toward the long dark trough where in the end the black flags sank and the red were extinguished like embers cast into cold water.

By 2020 no one was carrying flags. Instead people brandished the broken arms of mannequins, their neutral-tone bodies dragged from shop windows and piled on the asphalt among many other scattered, random objects fused together in bricolage barricades. The entire city had hours ago received a text message from the mayor declaring a 5 p.m. curfew (announced a mere 10 minutes before 5 p.m.), with anyone found outside in violation of the law subject to immediate arrest. And yet here were thousands, and in our stomachs not that falling feeling of imminent repression but instead the ecstatic ascent—a lightness that fills your gut somewhere just below the heart, making this heavy world appear suddenly weightless. I was not the only one feeling it. The excited, bewildered eyes peering out from masked faces seemed all to ask the same question: how far can this go? The answer came in the form of distant explosions rattling off the steel and glass, as the gas tanks of burning patrol cars ignited. Black pyres lifted like smoke signals in the distance, drawing new roving crowds through the

maze of skyscrapers. Finally, the police could no longer secure anything aside from a few key intersections, every mass gathering they dispersed melting into independent bands of impromptu riot and celebration. So in the end the cops just drove full speed through the crowded streets, sirens blaring, and lights blurring as night fell, running everyone off the road.

Rather than the end, this was just the beginning. Over the next few days, hyper-local rebellions proliferated in such number and variety that events became impossible to follow in their entirety. Neighboring Bellevue was immediately looted, despite the fact that Seattle's wealthier counterpart (an even more lifeless condo-plagued tech city) had never before been a site of major protests. Then the other malls in the area were hit, as latecomer looting broke out across the country—ignored or wildly distorted by major media outlets, rarely live streamed by activists, but nonetheless made visible via the beautifully ephemeral Snapchat Map, where I watched a teenager sprint out of the South Center Target clutching a vacuum cleaner in what might best be described as social reproduction of the deed. Meanwhile, in other major American cities, squads drove out in small groups to ransack wealthy shopping centers in places such as Santa Monica and Beverly Hills, or leapt onto slow-moving cargo trains in the vast rail terminal wastelands just beyond Chicago, throwing flatscreen TVs off the broken-open shipping containers.¹ It was at this point that the feeling of weightlessness became almost frightening—maybe the first time in any young person's life when the hibernating body of insurrection began to truly stir—and that glowing floating feeling stoked by burning precincts and patrol cars now became the terrifying lightness one feels when standing on a precipice, precisely when you realize just how far you might be about to fall.

The repression of the rebellion was systematic and all-encompassing. Later that same week the same mall parking lots were all filled with National Guardsmen training in crowd control formations. Meanwhile, the police gave free license to racist right-wing gangs in multiple American cities, who were caught on camera in places like Fishtown in Philadelphia assaulting even the most mild of the

This is precisely what had begun to happen by the end of that first week of protests, when several massive marches were called by the city's most respected activist organizations, many of which had retained their radical credentials throughout the last cycle of BLM protests and constantly spoke about the threat of the "non-profit industrial complex." But political actors and their attested positions do not matter. Only actions have a force to them, and it is in action that we can see the evidence of people's real, material political positions. Cowards on the street can never be communists. So what was the action determined by these activist groups, which at the moment had thousands following behind them even if they pretended to wield no influence? It was a mere series of marches to hollow, symbolic destinations such as city hall (or which simply sweated in long circles through rich neighborhoods, all already adorned with "Black Lives Matter" signs, of course), where the big stage would be set up after a performative confrontation with whatever mirage of power had been chosen, and then the invariably pedantic "speak-out" or "teach-in" would begin. Over the following weeks, numbers atrophied and the frequency of actions declined. The rise of the autonomous zone seemed to briefly revive attention as people flocked to its carnivalesque atmosphere, but the entire project devolved rapidly in yet another repetition of the past—though this time far more heavily armed—as the police simply sequestered the occupation, sent in informants, and worked with "leaders" in the movement to ensure that it would remain in opposition to the destruction of the precinct that it was camped around. Meanwhile, the city chipped away at its edges, removing the barricades (thereby enabling a series of deadly drive-by shootings), holding meetings with those same self-designated "leaders" and spreading disinformation. The patterns described years ago repeat themselves. It is all happening again.

But every iteration transforms. While the particulars of American racial politics have always ensured an easier entry for the suppressive social movement, the foundations of the procedure are beginning to be eroded by the growing scale of unrest and the growing crisis in the process of racialization itself—as class divisions within the various racial "communities" become more salient on the

port work. This would be particularly important in the American context, where the social movement and its adherents have been such an integral part of every city's cycle of repression. In Seattle, this was abundantly clear.

Over that first weekend at the end of May, the only repressive force present was the police. The gathering had not been called for by any professional activists, and it was therefore not shepherded in any way, nor directed toward particular symbols of power. The energy was not siphoned off in long "speak-outs" and other big stage talks. Because of this, it was still able to concentrate itself as a pure, blazing rage against the police and the entire edifice of the hell-world they represent. Quickly overcome in those first few days, the cops immediately reverted to their long-practiced tactics: assaulting in bursts, ceding territory, firing tear gas from afar, and hoping the protests would wind down. Meanwhile, all the softer repressive procedures were initiated, as the army of activists and progressives began to mobilize for the following week. It's important to emphasize here that there's really nothing conspiratorial going on behind the scenes. Informants and infiltrators are certainly deployed later, but they're rarely involved in the early stages.¹³ Instead, soft repression more often complements hard repression through its own autonomous activity, especially at first—at a much later stage, the two are ultimately reconciled and combined in the form of concessions and reforms made by the actual city government, but in such a way that the social movement conducting soft repression of the real movement sees such concessions as "victories" that it has won against the police and those in power. The salient fact here is that the police are not working with (most of) the city's activists, because they don't need to. The activists earnestly feel as if the movement is something that they have ownership over, because they dutifully bring a particular skillset, experience, and "analysis" with them. At the same time, they'll constantly disavow this ownership, emphasizing the movement's "leaderlessness" at precisely the moments when their guidance is most evident. Regardless of the mental gymnastics required, they earnestly see themselves as advancing the movement, even as they stifle it.

movement's supporters. In New York, cops simply continued to punch their way through every crowd. But these forms of hard repression are not really the way that rebellions are crushed in America. These forces, though dangerous and violent, are for the most part deployed only in particular cases to trim off the most militant edge of the movement, to record events for later prosecution, and to ensure a steady simmer of attacks in order to demoralize those on the streets. Other than this, they function almost purely as backup, waiting in the wings in case the real repression fails and the rebellion proves harder to contain. And here we find another of the inevitable repetitions.

Iterations

I wrote the book *Hinterland* (London: Reaktion/Rail Books, 2018) in the midst of another period of descent and repression, when the first cycle of what would come to be known as the Black Lives Matter movement emerged from the fires of Ferguson and died in the ledger of some 501©(3). The bulk of the writing occurred in 2015–2016, as the energy of the initial rebellion was siphoned off into mundane calls for body-cams on cops and other mild reforms promoted by the "official" leadership of the movement, who had by then poised themselves at the bottleneck of the inchoate rebellion's online branding. This was all while a number of people involved in the earliest days of the Ferguson protests were beginning to be found dead under "mysterious" circumstances—including two shot and bodies burned, several suspicious suicides, and one "accidental drowning."² At this point, the initial rebellion had spread to other cities in the same cycle of infinite repetition, leading to national protests and freeway closures and at least two other major epicenters of renewed rioting—in Baltimore in 2015 and Baton Rouge in 2016—but wound down quickly from there, capped by two lone wolf attacks against police and subsequent re-cremations within the movement and repression from without. By the end of the year attention had shifted almost entirely to the aftermath of the 2016 election, which simultaneously confirmed the deeply racist character of the American state and obscured the real terrain of struggle as newly-awakened liberals developed an

infantile obsession with the character of Trump himself, apparently blind to the fact that, until May of 2020, the largest uprising of Black youth in decades had occurred not only during a Democratic administration, but under the country's first Black president.

The election also led to a strange half-reading of *Hinterland*. Coincidentally, the book ended up being released in the same publishing cycle as hundreds of texts attempting to explain (incorrectly) the supposedly surprising election outcome as the result of “economic anxiety” among poor, rural whites. There was, therefore, an understandable impulse to place the book within that same sub-genre despite its quite clear conclusions to the contrary: in the first two chapters the reality of majority non-voting in poor rural areas was emphasized, the illusion of the “white working class” was dissolved, and the actual class character and urban dependence of relatively wealthy pseudo-rural exurbs was illustrated in detail. Nonetheless, many readers seemed to place an undue emphasis on my narrative of the rural and rust belt far hinterland, since these were the parts that, if misread only slightly, were easy enough to fit into a pre-existing narrative of American decline illustrated by exotic portrayals of rust-caked heartland decay. In this view, the rise of the militia movement described in the book was seen as indicative of a successful organizing drive by the growing far right, exemplified by Trump—rather than a stark but telling failure (as I argued), important only insofar as it hinted at how a far right mass movement might *potentially* form in the future, were it to open itself further to multiracial membership and position itself at the truly strategic location of class conflict in the US today: the suburbs.

Overall, this fashionable misreading emphasizes the far hinterland to the exclusion of the near hinterland. The far hinterland in the US is certainly important in its own regard, and it has numerous ongoing struggles of far better character than the militia movement—primarily led by indigenous people and workers up and down the food supply chain. But it is in the near hinterland (the urban fringes and inner ring suburbs surrounding every American city) that the conceptual core of the book lies. The hinterland is, altogether, a zone of exclusion from the nucleus of accumulation and

as it crashes we see the same shapes take form, and witness, maybe, scattered reflections of similar waves crashing elsewhere out there in the far waste of waters. Once, leaving Seattle's brief, strange attempt at an autonomous zone, a friend and I stumbled across a van ensconced in French flags and yellow vests parked near the edge of the barricades. We looked around for the driver but found no one near—just the meme floating free in full force, circling the world like a drifting ember. By then the movement here seemed to be fading as well, the defeat of its first act much quicker and more decisive than that in France. Despite appearing as the opposite, the birth of the autonomous zone was itself a product of the movement's initial suffocation. While it provided a certain spectacular spur to events elsewhere and offered a brief, transformational experience for a small handful of people, it also sealed in stone all the tactical regressions that had already taken shape as the social movement moved in to strangle the real movement beneath. In effect, then, this national rebellion ignited by the signal fire of a burning police precinct saw a symmetrical end to its first act when demonstrators refused to burn another precinct ceded to them by a similar police retreat.

There is no need to go into exact detail here, since it's a description of ongoing events that remain mutable and since much of it so far is the same déjà vu repetition of similar tragedies described in *Hinterland*, administered by the same exact people over the course of the past decade.¹² The wave, of course, crashes down. But there is at least a sense now that this might simply be an eddy and not the final end. Instead, we may be witnessing the beginning of a second act triggered by the decision to deploy federal police forces to several American cities, the result of which has been a rapid upscaling of militancy in places like Portland and Seattle. It is in these two cities, alongside Atlanta, that we see the extremely incremental beginning of something like the “frontliner” formations in Hong Kong or the *cortège de tête* in France, where even the more peaceable members of large demonstrations understand the centrality of those engaging in militant action and, at minimum, refuse to condemn such activities. Frequently, though, they ultimately go beyond this minimum and begin doing some sort of concrete sup-

that the far-right could not monopolize the movement and the center-left could not co-opt it, since both are ultimately dedicated to the preservation of the market and the protection of private property. Thus was demonstrated by the concept of “looting as an anti-fascist measure,”¹¹ a political ingenuity that would be absent in Hong Kong and desperately suppressed by the established political forces in the US. It is this fidelity to radical actions (the oath) and not to professed radical actors or language or symbology (the program) that ensures the political trajectory of such struggles. In the early dawn of this next century of terrifying class combat, it appears that communism glows only dimly over the horizon, and rises first in shades of yellow.

The Death of Everything

I like to believe that beneath the crashing waves there is a sort of rising tide or even something like an inching upward of the sea level, maybe much like that witnessed in our own planet’s agonizingly slow deluge, now threatening to drown half the earth and extinguish the rest in a cascading desert. But if that flood is the real apocalypse—our hellworld finally ensuring the death of all in capitalism’s spectacular suicide—the flood I hope for at the close of *Hinterland* is a more rapturous torrent. It is the recognition that if time is a crashing wave it is nonetheless a wave that might be riding the surge of a reborn history, destined to submerge this smoldering hellworld, to drown its billionaires while buoying the billions up toward something that might look at least a little bit like communism. But history, of course, is fundamentally contingent. It is something built by people, not a destiny laid out for them in stages. So maybe hope doesn’t quite capture the effect here, because what I argue for, after all, is an oath. It is the fact that there will need to be people who commit themselves to further opening the potentials of growing class conflicts in general and to the building of communism specifically, since a communist society will never be the simple, automatic product of even the most advanced churnings of the “real movement,” which I call the historical party.

The wave is still there, regardless of what exactly it sits atop. Even

consumption. If this nucleus is symbolically embodied in the hollow, palatial downtown core imagining itself to be the postindustrial abode of “creatives” and administrators, then the hinterland is simply everything disavowed in this illusion. It is all those people beyond the wall of the central city, as well as all those who drive in from the new rings of poverty to staff its hidden inner workings.

In the far hinterland, you see such exclusion at its extreme, where the general evacuation of population and industry means that even the best political mobilizations are not only difficult, but also wield little leverage and pose only a minor threat to those in power. In the near hinterland, this exclusion is more immanent to the system, and therefore far more threatening. These are the neighborhoods that house the city’s own lowest-tier service workers, where poverty is increasing the fastest, where new immigrants from overseas are settling first, and where people pushed out of central cities by gentrification are finding themselves. But more importantly: these districts also act as a disavowed economic core for every major metro area in the US, not only in terms of labor power but also in terms of production itself—they are key hubs in the global industrial infrastructure, actively being built up in order to draw on the pools of cheap labor that exist just beyond the eyesight of the average liberal urbanite. It is in these invisible suburbs, unincorporated areas, borderland *colonias* and newly segregated ghettos on the city’s edge that we find the locus of class struggle in the United States today.

The fact remains that the first major rebellion in America in the 21st century began in a suburb in Missouri. But the phenomenon is not in any way limited to the American case. In fact, America’s changing geography of production is best understood as a return to the global norm of capitalist urbanization, where industry-adjacent working class settlements (whether public housing or informal slums) form a halo around sprawling urban centers of culture and consumption. This also means that its landscape of class conflict is also returning to something like the global norm. The Ferguson uprising, then, is best understood as one local iteration in a worldwide renewal of struggle, elevated in many places to the

threat of literal insurrection—the moment deemed by Alain Badiou, quite correctly, as the “rebirth of history.” These struggles have almost universally been defined, however, by an irreconcilable contradiction of geography equally global in scope. Even when they involve people from peri-urban proletarian zones with substantial industrial infrastructure, such events have tended not only to ignore the sphere of production as such, but also to be lured into the gigantic kettle of the heavily policed downtown core. In these downtowns, rebellions simmer off into protests, and even the most successful (i.e. Egypt) can only obtain false victories because they have posed themselves against the mirage of power, in the form of ruling parties and parliaments or the lavish finance-and-shopping district, while often quite literally passing through the real nexus of power, embodied in the many nodes and corridors of the global productive infrastructure centered in the suburbs.

Ferguson was not only preceded by very similar suburban riots across France in 2005, in the Pearl River Delta between 2008 and 2014,³ and throughout England in 2011, but also by the global movements of the squares—which began not in the Arab World, as the popular narrative has it, but in Thailand in 2010, when the Red Shirts occupied the Ratchaprasong shopping district in central Bangkok. The Thai case is a particularly telling example of the geographic conundrum, since it involved the literal bussing-in of many residents of the country’s agricultural far hinterland (particularly from the poor northeastern region of Isan) and the mass participation of poorer migrant workers living in the city’s industrial fringe. The mass influx of people from the hinterland into the urban core paralyzed the city, raised the looming specter of popular insurrection, and disrupted the smooth flow of political administration. But the entire process involved very few strikes or other industrial actions, and essentially no threat of mass land seizures. It was a perfect example of a struggle where the basic grievances of those involved (which were often directly economic) were rerouted into demands for political change, since the movement itself had cohered around the defense of a banned populist opposition party led by the telecom billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra (and, later, his sister Yingluck).⁴ Meanwhile, despite the fact that the partici-

mirror what they’d predicted:

“Precisely because the yellow vests came from nowhere, or at least from a place far from the watchwords and pieties of the left, some radicals remained suspicious, even hostile to the turn of events. Resistance to taxes does not fit easily into the radical left’s grammar of demands, and if it does not fit, then it must be affixed with some other political label: populist, right wing, fascist, etc.”⁹

The result was that these veterans of social movement politics initially decried the mobilizations, even imagining them to be controlled, in almost conspiratorial fashion, by the far right. Ironically, these sort of identity-based critiques from the far left would soon be taken up by the state itself, as justification for the repression of the movement once it had spread across the nation. Meanwhile, this early rejection on the part of established activists—including many so-called anarchists and communists—neither stopped the movement nor handed it to the right. Instead, it was driven forward by widespread participation among relatively depoliticized proletarians, whose basic, pragmatic approach to the question of power free of debates about political ethics allowed for a rapid expansion of tactics.

Not only did the protestors occupy roundabouts and mobilize in towns across the far hinterland, bringing the movement to the literal doorsteps of the French proletariat, but they also led attacks that pierced into the heart of the city itself:

“[they] besieged the Arc de Triomphe and surrounding boulevards, forcing riot cops to retreat and making most French black bloc actions look like a quiet game of chess in comparison. Yellow vests looted the shopping districts of the eighth and ninth arrondissements, posh neighborhoods in the center of Paris, popping champagne bottles in front of the wrecked facades of banks.”¹⁰

These attacks against property, meanwhile, succeeded in ensuring

yet again in flame.

If someone were to take the general logic laid out in *Hinterland* and, through some black magic, encase it in the flesh of an actual mass political movement, I suspect that such a golem would wear a yellow vest. As I watched events unfold from a distance in 2018, I was struck by a stark, hopeful *déjà vu*: the immediate spark for the movement in France was precisely the type of conflict over extractive rents that epitomizes much of the class experience in the hinterland—in particular mirroring the predicament of the far hinterland in the US, where I argue that struggles cohere around the question of taxes and fees precisely because people largely experience exploitation as a matter of rents, rather than wages. These areas are also sprawling and distant from public infrastructure, meaning that residents are predominantly dependent on car transport and life is defined by long commutes. In this context, a fuel tax is doubly eviscerating. The early geography of the rebellion is hardly a surprise, then:

“[...] the movement spread throughout France, with the exception, initially, of the wealthy megacities and their inner rings of suburbs. It was most massive in what has been baptized the “Diagonale du Vide” (or ‘empty diagonal,’ so called for its low population density), a swath stretching roughly northeast-to-southwest through central France, but also more broadly, into the distant suburban and rural areas where cars have become a vital necessity.”⁸

But the conflict hardly remained confined to the far hinterland. Instead, it soon flooded into the urban complex itself, generating a constellation of new rebel territories stretching from the posh city centers out to the proletarian suburbs. This not only broke with the established geography of protest, but also completely scrambled the country’s pre-existing political coordinates.

In a situation almost identical to that of Hong Kong a year later, the established leftist groups initially kept their distance from the movement, since its “problematic” social composition failed to

pants were from the very farms and factory districts that formed the backbone of the Thai economy, their rebellion was lured out of these major economic arteries and into the non-essential but hyper-visible playground of consumption, where it became less threatening but more spectacular. This prefigured a pattern that would be repeated again and again around the world in the following years.

Shades of Yellow

But each iteration also tends to carry a certain memory of past failures. The spiral of struggle is widening as more of the population is drawn in. Now, in any given country and any given conflict, events are beginning to overspill old limits. As the same path is tread again and again, more of the youth recognize, with a frantic frustration, that the patterns laid down by those who preceded them tend toward a neurotic circle of pure, peaceful, and impotent protest that must be violently shattered if a true rebellion is to be born. The change in tactics can be quite rapid, almost always catching the activists off guard. I recall giving a handful of talks at a few small left-wing art spaces and bookstores in Hong Kong in the summers of 2014 and 2015, just before the outbreak of the Umbrella Movement and just after it—while also attending a few of the June-July protests that occur regularly in the city, at the time some of the most miserable and boring (but often quite enormous) protests I had seen, thousands sprawled out on the pavement of Admiralty through the hot, humid nights of the island’s summer, with the crowd congealed around large discussion platforms dominated by the language of non-violence and the guidance of the conservative pan-democrats with their constellation of student groups and NGOs. It was in every sense exactly the sort of “social movement” that professional activists in the US had long dreamt of, with every interest group bringing their own “struggle” to the table and negotiating—in long, drawn-out meetings and teach-ins helmed by the liberals—how all these struggles might converge into a single coalitional body.⁵

The talks I gave in this context, however, were a prefiguration of

some of the major themes of *Hinterland*, with an emphasis on riots and a strong condemnation of social movements, down to their most fundamental logic. Against discourse, consciousness-raising, and the connect-the-dots convergence of different identities and their distinct struggles, I posed the simple concrete question of power. In a talk in 2014, when I detailed rebellions and insurrections elsewhere and then suggested that riots might return to Hong Kong as well, I was met with a polite incredulity, as local activists explained that “Hong Kong people are just too civil to do something like that.” But by 2015, after the failure of the non-violent Umbrella Movement, a new form of politics had already begun to stir, albeit blindly. In those later talks the audience at least recognized that a tactical split had started to form within the movement before its defeat—epitomized by the divide between those who supported the “big stage” (大台) set up by the student groups and pan-democrats and those calling to “tear down the big stage” (拆大台)—but many in the local left nonetheless considered the more aggressive tactics that emerged late in the movement to be merely the isolated and unpopular actions of a few hardcore youths drawn toward the city’s far-right localists, who at the time offered some of the only public support for those who had attempted to smash the windows of Parliament.⁶ This, more than anything, blinded the established social movement scene to what was coming.

Four years later, I would stand on those same streets in that same humid heat. But now there were no discussion platforms. The sprawling crowd was instead on its feet and their basic principle, repeated in English as “decentralization,” was literally “without a big stage” (无大台)—a slogan in open condemnation of the fundamental unit of the “social movement.”⁷ Instead of many intersecting identity groups connecting the dots of their separate struggles, there was now a single black wave armed with lasers and hammers and topped by yellow helmets. Nathan Road was littered with pried-up bricks and knocked-over street signs, everything encased in a pale skin of graffiti raging against the police and the dying of the city. Random youths stood on a pedestrian overpass, hurling insults in Cantonese at a distant line of riot police, who hurled their own insults back. The police had, at this point, lost whatever illusion

of order they’d once projected, sprinting between intersections wild-eyed, forming makeshift lines, and taking random swings of the baton to clear a corridor for traffic only to abandon it minutes later under pressure from the crowd. Not only had riots returned in full force to the city, but they’d become immanent to it, with general dissatisfaction so broadly distributed across the populace that protestors could easily dissolve into the urban fabric. More importantly, each moment of escalation in the sequence leading up to this was driven by young people with little commitment to any pre-existing political ethic, many from the “New Town” suburban clusters in the near hinterland, all of whom had been born into the failures of past movements, excluded from the urban core by skyrocketing costs and faced with general economic stagnation for the rest of their foreseeable lives. They were rapidly politicized not by activist consciousness-raising but by the mere fact that they had no hope for the future. Thus, they approached tactics with no theoretical qualms or political commitments, instead confronting the pragmatic question of power head-on.

The result was one of the most organized, competent, and geographically expansive urban political conflicts in our generation, despite its distinct political underdevelopment—epitomized by the waving of American flags and naïve calls for the US (which had literally been training the Hong Kong police for years) to intervene in the name of “freedom and democracy.” But this underdevelopment was not coincidental. In fact, it was only through such a rigorous depoliticization that radical actions could replace the endless discussion and performance of radical activists. In every respect, the liberal language of freedom and democracy was exceeded by the real movement surging beneath it—which in such a moment could only be speechless, rejecting all discourse. It is fitting, then, that a city long known as the global capital of civil society and social movement organizing would be among the earliest to see the social movement die out, replaced with open conflict. But the Hong Kong sequence was not really the first of its type. Instead, the yellow helmets were much the same yellow as the vests that had populated France a year prior, just a different shade, and the burning of Hong Kong was a re-enactment of a Paris baptized